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THE CANONIZATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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It is the aim of this article to trace in its broader outlines the history of the Old Testament canon. What were the purposes and influences that led the Jewish church to assemble portions of its inheritance of religious literature and at length to constitute them into a standard of religious thought? What principle of selection was applied in separating sacred from ordinary books, and how did the process of canonization affect the religious life and thought of the nation? Whoever attempts to answer these questions must expect to encounter at the outset two obstacles, the one negative, the other positive.

The mistaken belief that the Old Testament writings assumed their present form in the times of which they treat, and that the several books became authoritative immediately upon their appearance is in spite of much recent progress more widespread than is commonly supposed in critical circles. Modern biblical scholarship, it is true, has proved beyond a reasonable doubt the composite character of many Old Testament books. They are found to have a complex literary history during which they grew by compilation and redaction. Where, as in the case of the Pentateuch, the origins of the various literary strata are separated by the space of centuries, it is as impossible to believe in the original inviolable canonicity of the resulting product as in its collective Mosaic authorship. So long as compilers felt free to add, subtract, and modify, it can hardly have been esteemed canonical. In other words, the final act of canonization, if there was one, must have taken place after the final compilation and redaction.

The critical conclusions of Old Testament literary analysis are therefore an indispensable preliminary to an inquiry into the process by which the Hebrew Bible was standardized. They open a per-

spective across a long literary history and prove conclusively that the origin of Hebrew literature and the origin of the Hebrew canon were not coincident. Hence Ryle justly distinguishes "three stages under which we recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit in preparing for us the Revelation of the Word contained in the Old Testament." These stages are the formative, the redactional, and the selective. The critical knowledge and mental discipline presupposed by such an approach to the problem will always constitute to the popular mind a serious negative difficulty even where modern biblical scholarship is given a welcome.

But there is a positive difficulty of even more formidable character. This consists in a total absence of direct evidence from reliable Jewish sources on the origin and history of the Old Testament canon. In 1538 Elias Levita, a learned Jew, wrote his *Massoreth hammassoreth* wherein he set forth the view that Ezra and "the men of the great synagogue" united "the twenty-four books" of the Old Testament into one volume and divided them into the three parts known as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Hagiographa). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Christian scholars like Buxtorf, Hottinger, Leusden, and Carpzov adopted uncritically this view of Levita and gave it the stamp of orthodoxy in Christian circles. But there was no historical foundation for Levita's assertion. It was a mixture of legendary Jewish tradition and mere conjecture. The traditional sources of information to which he had access are still accessible to us and enable us to discriminate between what he found and what he imagined.

The leading Jewish references to the origin of the Hebrew canon, arranged in the order of antiquity, are the following: the preface to the Proverbs of Jesus ben-Sira, prefixed by the author's grandson to his Greek translation, *ca.* 130 B.C.; an obviously spurious letter at the beginning of the Second Book of Maccabees, first century B.C.; the Fourth Book of Ezra, an apocryphal book written near the end of the first century A.D.; the *Bâba bâthra* of the Talmud; and Josephus in his work against Apion, written toward the close of the first century A.D. The content of these passages, sometimes grotesquely legendary, contradictory in details, and in conflict with well-ascertained historical facts as well as with the internal

evidence of the Old Testament books, is valuable only for an indirect testimony to an early tripartite division of the Hebrew canon.

This threefold division of the canon, however, has furnished biblical scholars with an important clue. It suggests that there really were three canons successively formed, and that the collective designation employed by the Jews, "Law, Prophets, and Writings" (Torah, Nebī'im, Kethubhim), preserves a recollection of the fact. The arrangement of books in our Hebrew Bibles, fixed since the days of the Massora, with slight variations within the third group, is as follows: I, "The Law," or five books of the Pentateuch; II, "The Prophets," divided into the "Former Prophets," the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the "Later Prophets," Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (minor prophets); III, "The [holy] Writings," i.e., Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Five Rolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra (including Nehemiah), and Chronicles. The arrangement of books in our Christian Bibles, which differs decidedly from the above, is traceable to the Septuagint. In the latter the Hebrew order was discarded in favor of a past-present-future scheme of arrangement in which the historical books came first, then the didactic, including the poetical books, and finally the prophetic books. By this procedure the books of the third division were in part redistributed and made to change places with those of the second division. Whatever hint the Hebrew order contained regarding the age and character of certain books was thus obscured. The Book of Daniel probably suffered most, for it was thrust bodily among the prophets, though protesting by position and content, "Neither a prophet, nor a prophet's son am I." Only comparatively recent scholarship has succeeded in elucidating the significance of its place in the third canon.

It seems clear, then, that for an answer to our questions we must fall back upon a critical estimate of the internal evidence of the individual books, and compare this with the arrangement of the Hebrew canon, and such extra-biblical data as have come down to us. The logical starting-point is Deuteronomy. The nucleus of this book was found in the Jerusalem temple and immediately promulgated in 621 B.C. Its divine authority was apparently

not questioned. The effect of the reading upon Josiah and his advisers, and the thorough reformation which followed, leave no doubt upon this point. There is every reason to believe that it was the first book of the Bible which attained a certain degree of canonical authority.¹ Yet there was no formal act of canonization, nor did a gradual growth of popular esteem lead up to its public acceptance. Making its appearance as a long-forgotten, God-inspired book of assumed Mosaic authorship, it immediately became a religious standard.

Deuteronomy, as is well known, represents a compromise between prophetic and priestly tendencies. The former stood for spontaneity and moral initiative, the latter for tradition and ceremonial legalism. It lay in the nature of the reform, and the importance it attached to legitimacy of *place* and *ritual*, that the centralization of worship at Jerusalem played into the hands of the priests. They soon found in the letter of Deuteronomy a convenient prop for pretensions opposed to its spirit.²

Then moral freedom, in the person of Jeremiah, begins its struggle against the bondage of tradition. A living maker of the nascent Bible is put on trial by its earliest perverters. Cast out in its grosser forms, idolatry returns under the more insidious garb of bibliolatry. The evils of standardized book religion—Deuteronomy being the book—are scathingly arraigned by Jeremiah: "How do ye say, We are wise and the law of Jahveh is with us? But, behold, the lying pen of the scribes hath made of it a falsehood. The wise men are put to shame and taken—lo, they have rejected the word of Jahveh, and what manner of wisdom is in them?" (8:8, 9).

After the destruction of Jerusalem patriotic interest in the nation's past and the hope of a coming restoration gave a new stimulus to the collection of Israel's literature. Those portions which recorded the deeds of their national heroes, prophetic lore

¹ The only rival for this distinction would be the Book of the Covenant, Exod., chaps. 20-23. But Deuteronomy preserved of it what could be modernized and abrogated the rest.

² Cf. Bade, "Der Monojehwismus des Deuteronomiums," *ZATW*, II (1910), 86-88; also *Biblical World* (September, 1909), 181.

which seemed to throw a gleam of explanation and hope upon their national disaster, and those digests of ceremonial law whose observance was deemed necessary to guard the purity of external worship naturally had first claims to consideration. The increasing importance attached to Deuteronomy is strikingly apparent in the complete revision to which existing historical documents were now subjected. The JE material in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings is conformed to the new religious standard.

Nevertheless the Book of Deuteronomy was not yet canonical in the sense of later times. It did not imply a degree of holiness which prevented alterations and additions. Ezekiel feels free to project a new legislative scheme (chaps. 40-48) that contravenes Deuteronomy at a number of points. Still later, in 444 or perhaps 432, Ezra solemnly promulgated "the book of the law of Moses" (Neh. 3:1 ff.) which is most plausibly to be identified with the substance of our Priests' Code (P). Enough is mentioned of its content to show that its provisions and implications superseded Deuteronomy, or were at variance with it, at a number of crucial points. Furthermore, recent discoveries³ in Egypt have shown that a Jewish colony at Elephantine knew or cared so little about the central doctrine of Deuteronomy that when Egyptians in 410 B.C. destroyed their temple they applied first to Jerusalemite, then to Samaritan, officials for political aid in their endeavor to secure permission to rebuild. But a rigorist like Ezra could have regarded the destruction of the high place at Elephantine only as a deserved judgment of Jahveh. Nöldeke, therefore, sees in the false move of the priests at Elephantine decisive proof that the Priests' Code must have been proclaimed by Ezra in Jerusalem only a little before 410 B.C. The Jewish colony at Elephantine dated the construction of its Jahveh sanctuary back to the "days of the kings of Egypt," i.e., before the Persian conquest in 525 B.C. Therefore the type of religion that speaks to us in these Aramaic papyri is evidently the popular Jahvism of the pre-Deuteronomic period in

³ Sachau, "Drei aramäische Papyrusurkunden aus Elephantine," *Preuss. Akademie der Wiss.*, Berlin, 1907 u. 1908; "Ein altaramäischer Papyrus aus der Zeit des ägyptischen Königs Amyrtaeus," *Florilegium Melchior de Vogüé*, 529-41 (Paris, 1909); Adolphe Lods, *Les découvertes d'Éléphantine et l'Ancien Testament* (Montbéliard, 1910).

Israel. In a remote corner of Egypt it continued to flourish long after the proclamation of Deuteronomy at Jerusalem.

These facts force upon us the inference that Deuteronomy exercised during this period an authoritative influence over religious thought, but that it had not yet acquired the inviolable sacredness which we associate with the later idea of canonicity. The public ratification of Ezra's law book—assuming it to have been substantially what we know as P—introduces us to a confused and confusing stage in the growth of the Pentateuch. Internal evidence tends to show that three of its constituent elements coexisted independently for a brief period; these were the Deuteronomically revised edition of the earlier compilatory work JE; an expanded edition of the law book published by Josiah, i.e., Deuteronomy; and the Priestly Law solemnly promulgated by Ezra. Such canonical claims as were made on behalf of the last two at this time must have conflicted somewhat. The very fact that the sacerdotal party of Ezra found it difficult or impossible to displace Deuteronomy with the Priests' Code may have been one of the determining influences that led to the new compilation and redaction by which P was united with JED.

In the absence of all external evidence the precise time at which this took place is difficult to fix. Those who favor an earlier date point to the fact that the defection and establishment of the Samaritan community took place about 400 B.C., and that its acceptance of the entire Pentateuch proves the latter to have been completed before that date. Others, who fix upon a somewhat later date, urge in favor of their view evidence of subsequent redaction and the surprising liberties which the author of the Book of Jubilees (*ca.* 40 B.C.) still permits himself in the treatment of matters contained in the Law, although he is a strict Pharisee. But for our purpose the year 400 B.C., when Plato's brilliant intellect was beginning to illuminate the philosophy of Greece, may be regarded as marking the completion of the Pentateuch and the beginning of its integral canonical history. Henceforward its sacrosanct character in Jewish religious thought assumes increasingly absurd and superstitious forms as it approaches and passes into the Christian era.

We now turn to the formation of the second canon, that of the prophets. The foundations of the prophetic canon—the "former

prophets" or the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—were laid by the separation of the Law from the historical material contained in these writings. Nothing is more clearly established by critical evidence than that the Book of Joshua formed originally a work continuous with the Pentateuch. When it was separated from the Law it no doubt continued to enjoy, with kindred historical documents, the esteem which it had previously acquired.

About 300 B.C. it was deemed desirable, in priestly circles, to rewrite the historical books from the point of view of the Priests' Code. The result was our present Book of Chronicles together with those of Ezra and Nehemiah. Considering the differences of fact and of theory between this Levitical history of Israel and the earlier Deuteronomic view of that history, it is impossible to suppose that the writer of the former attached canonical importance to the latter. The historical books of the "former prophets" were only *on the way* to canonicity when the Chronicler tried to displace them with his own didactic history which he must have considered truer to the facts. The prevailing judgment of the time evidently favored the earlier history, for Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings was included in the second canon, while Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah was left over to be included eventually in a third canon when time had softened the issues out of which it arose. It is probable that its early acceptance as a Midrash on the earlier books opened the door for future promotion.

The Joshua-Kings group of writings was classified as prophetic literature because it was popularly believed to have been written by prophets, whose messages *par excellence*, therefore, had intrinsic claims to consideration. A large collection of prophetic sermons must have been in the hands of scribes of the fifth century B.C. Isaiah alluded to the preservation of his prophecies in writing (30:8), and Baruch's services as amanuensis to Jeremiah are well known. Internal evidence shows that there were a number of independent collections which were later combined. It is not surprising to find that some of these ascribed the same prophecy to different prophets.⁴

⁴ Isa. 2:2-4=Mic. 4:1-3; Jer. 49:7-22=Obad., vss. 1-9. In the latter case internal evidence tends to show that both Jeremiah and Obadiah used an earlier prophecy; Matt. 27:9 still quotes Zech. 11:13 as from Jeremiah.

But if collections of prophecies were in existence long before the canon of the Torah was closed (*ca.* 400 B.C.) and prophets were accredited spokesmen of Jahveh, why was not this literature canonized with the Torah? Doubtless Budde is right in assigning as the main reason the belief, traceable to the Deuteronomic school, that the prophets were merely expounders of the Law, and not organs of new revelation; that they were sent to admonish an unfaithful people to observe the Law, and to announce judgment upon the impenitent. Theirs was conceived to have been a transitory function beside the eternal validity of the Law.⁵ Accordingly the Jews applied to all scriptural books outside of the Law the term *Kabbala*—tradition. This growing zeal for the Torah, and the belief that the prophets must sustain an ancillary relation to it, led in the time of Christ to a revival of doubts regarding the canonical character of the Book of Ezekiel on account of its evident lack of conformity with the Law.

That the presuppositions of this view were both historically and theoretically false must be stated here without argument. The great pre-exilic prophets never knew the Torah—except, perhaps, in embryo—by which the Jewish doctors tried to judge them. If the elaborate sacrificial ceremonial of the priestly portions of the Pentateuch, notably Leviticus, had been in existence in the days of Isaiah, or of Jeremiah, could the former have asked his scornful question, “Who hath required this at your hand?” (1:12), or the latter have denied absolutely that Jahveh gave commands about sacrifices during the exodus period (Jer. 7:22, 23)? Christianity, following the lead of Jesus, has rightly reversed the judgment of the Jewish church by placing the prophets, both in use and in value, above the Law.

But let us not lose sight of the main point, that the prophets’ canon was not set apart for the same reason as the Law. The latter was standardized by authority from without, the former by authority from within. Of course, this distinction must not be pressed too far. No doubt the latest candidates for admission to the prophetic canon were tested by their conformity with the

⁵ Cf. Neh. 8:26–31; II Kings 17:13. Paul in turn makes the Law transitory in its relation to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

Torah.⁶ It simply means that, on account of a mass of unmoral ritual ordinances (cf. Mark 7:15), the moral appeal of the Law was less strong than that of the pre-exilic, and consequently prelegal, prophets. Therefore the writings of the latter may be said to have won their way to recognition by their inherent character, whereas the Torah was started on its canonical career by the promulgation of Deuteronomy under Josiah, and the solemn public imposition of the Priests' Code by Ezra.

Jesus ben-Sira (*ca.* 190 B.C.) was acquainted with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. But the collection was hardly complete at that time, for the roll of Isaiah and also that of Zechariah appear clearly to have received additions subsequently. Nevertheless the prophets' canon must have been substantially closed about 200 B.C., otherwise the Book of Daniel, which originated about 164 B.C., would doubtless have been included in the prophets' group. Dan. 9:2 cites Jer. 25:11 as in "the books," a designation which seems to be equivalent to "the Scriptures," and as such implies the completion of the second group. The closure of the prophets' canon was accompanied by the popular belief that prophecy had ceased and that no more prophets were to arise.

This latter belief had an important influence upon the selection of books for the third group—"the Writings." The employment of the Psalms in the liturgical service of the Second Temple naturally gave this book the first place in the third canon. Being a flower-gathering from a large field of Hebrew poesy, it contains ancient songs besides some that are from the Maccabean era. The first quotation from the Psalter accompanied by the formula of citation from Scripture occurs in I Macc. 7:16, a book that dates from about 90 B.C. Hence the admission of the Psalter to the rank of Scripture must have taken place between 200 and 100 B.C. The third canon began *ipso facto*. In Luke 24:44 the Psalter still does deputy service for the entire third group.

As stated above, a new principle of selection comes into play in the determination of the third canon, that of antiquity. Among

⁶ There were misgivings regarding the Book of Jonah, doubtless because of its universalistic tendencies which were opposed to the exclusivism of the Law.

the Pharisees the problem resolved itself into the question, "What books defile the hands?"⁷ Controversy centered chiefly about the admissibility of Ecclesiastes, Esther, and the Song of Songs, three books that hardly formed a part—certainly no undisputed part—of the Hebrew Bible during the time of Christ and the apostles. No doubt the content of these and other books of the third division had much to do with the objections raised against them by some Jewish rabbis. But the first question appears always to have been whether they originated within the prophetic period which was believed to have come to a close in the days of Ezra.

Men who desired to deliver an authoritative religious message to their times, therefore, resorted to the device of putting their thoughts into the mouths of ancient worthies who lived within the prophetic period. The Book of Daniel, in particular, is an example of this predated and pseudepigraphic literature. That its real character was understood by contemporaries is proved by the many imitations which followed in its wake. In a real sense, therefore, apocalyptic literature is the product of a situation created by the foreclosure of prophecy, and this in turn resulted from the formal completion of the prophetic canon. Those, however, who secured canonical recognition for the Book of Daniel can hardly have done so with the knowledge that it contained mainly history written in predictive form after the event. It doubtless was included through a misconception of its age and character.

In a deeper sense, even, is this true of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Professing to have Solomon for their author these "rolls" had excellent chances for recognition in an uncritical age that laid supreme emphasis on antiquity and the prestige of famous names. Hence it came about that a collection of wedding songs, made in the third century B.C., was included under the mistaken belief that in them Solomon allegorically portrayed the love of Jahveh for Israel. In spite of strong objection from the school of Shammai, Ecclesiastes was finally included as a Solomonic book, though written about seven centuries after his time. On the other hand the book of ben-Sira, which, in comparison with these, richly

⁷ Books that "defile the hands" are holy (*tabu*), i.e., canonical; ordinary books do not defile the hands. This curious phrase arose from the primitive belief that contact with things holy as well as unclean required ritual cleansing.

deserved to be included in the canon, was excluded because it honestly bore the name of its author, and thus was known to have originated after the limit of the prophetic period. The youngest of all Old Testament books is Esther. Measured by the standard of Christ its religious value is nil, for its conception of the Golden Rule is that of David Harum. But it went into the miscellaneous third canon under the semblance of antiquity and through its association with the Feast of Purim.

The content of the third canon seems to have become fixed with the definitive admission of the above-mentioned disputed books about the close of the first Christian century. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D. the Jewish rabbinate for some time had its headquarters at Jamnia (Jabne). There a synod is reported to have been held about 90 A.D. which formally approved of the view that Canticles and Ecclesiastes "defile the hands," i.e., are canonical. If so, this act closed the triple canon of the Old Testament.

For lack of space it has not been possible to include in this article the contributory evidence of the early Greek and Syriac versions, the testimony of ancient modes of making books, nor the modifying effect of a gradual change in theory regarding inspiration. For convenience of reference a condensed chronological table of the Hebrew canon is appended.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

THE LAW

750 B.C.	Existing literary materials represented chiefly by the traditions of J and E; Book of the Covenant.
621	Public acceptance of Deuteronomy.
ca. 432	Promulgation of the Priests' Code by Ezra.
ca. 400	Union of JEP, D, and P, followed by closure of the first canon.

THE PROPHETS

ca. 400 B.C.	Deuteronomic edition of Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings becomes the basis of a new canon under the hands of priestly redactors.
400-250	Collections of prophecies compiled; acquired importance, perhaps, in devotional use.
250-200	Completion and closure of prophets' canon.

THE WRITINGS

- ca.* 200 B.C. Collections of Psalms in use from about 450 B.C. are compiled into a larger collection.
- ca.* 150 Completion of the Psalter with the fourth and fifth books.
- ca.* 100 B.C.—1 A.D. Probable admission of Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel.
- ca.* 100 A.D. Admission, under protest, of the disputed books—Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Chronicles. Synod of Jamnia about 90 A.D. Closure of triple canon.